

VA**U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs**

News Release

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Springfield, MA -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is announcing an agreement with the Shriners Hospitals for Children (SHC) to provide the best available medical care to children of Vietnam veterans who are suffering from spina bifida.

The agreement follows a National Academy of Sciences report last year on Vietnam veterans and Agent Orange, which concluded that there is limited/suggestive evidence that the children of Vietnam veterans who served in theater face an elevated risk of spina bifida. VA sought and Congress approved legislation (P.L. 104-204) enabling the department to provide medical benefits, vocational training, and cash assistance to children of Vietnam veterans born with the disease.

Said VA Secretary Jesse Brown, "Today marks the beginning of new hope for some of our youngest Americans with spina bifida and their families. We don't know how many children of Vietnam veterans may suffer from this disabling disease. But we do know that their future looks brighter today because the Shriners Hospitals for Children will be working with VA in providing them treatment."

SHC, a not-for-profit charitable corporation, is the largest pediatric orthopedic hospital system in the country with 17 units located in 15 states.

Under the agreement, SHC will evaluate children with spina bifida whose entitlement has been established by VA, a process initiated by calling 1-800-827-1000. For those accepted for treatment, SHC will provide outpatient or inpatient care for this diagnosis up to age 18. SHC will accept no reimbursement for this care.

Beginning in October, for children older than 18 and for those whose parents or guardians choose not to receive their care at SHC, VA will reimburse the non-SHC facilities for providing appropriate care. VA also will begin reimbursing non-SHC facilities for necessary medical services that are not offered by SHC and cover transportation costs for patients and their parent or legal guardian to an SHC unit or any outside facility required for proper treatment of the patient.

There are approximately 600 Vietnam veterans' children with spina bifida known to VA. Estimates of the total number of children who might be using these benefits range between 1,000 and 3,000.

Currently, approximately 5,000 children afflicted with spina bifida are receiving treatment at SHC facilities, the largest number of such patients treated by one hospital system throughout the world.

Over its 75-year existence, SHC has provided medical treatment to more than 500,000 children and has done so totally free of charge, accepting neither government, insurance nor family reimbursement.